Anonymous

Frank Slide

On the morning of April 29, 1903, a C. P. R. west-bound freight train crawled slowly through the Crow's Nest Pass; through the little mining town of Frank, and past the dim, massive shape of Turtle Mountain. The time was just after four o'clock.

To the boys on the train the trip was routine. The sounds were just the same; the dim, cold light was normal for the time of year. In the caboose, Sid Choquette, the brakeman, was thinking that he'd be glad when the sun came up, for the air was cold and damp.

In Frank, the barkeeper at the hotel had just finished cleaning up. He'd had a hard night. He was going home to bed . . . just as soon as he got rid of a lone drunk who was hanging around. The barkeeper sighed, put on his hat, and reached out his hand for the drunk's collar.

Down the street Sam Ennes stirred in his bed. For some reason he was uneasy . . . couldn't sleep. He struck a match and looked at his watch. The time was seven minutes past four. He lay down again, pulled the bedclothes over his shoulders. He shut his eyes, but in a minute he flicked them open and lay in the darkness. He strained

his ears to hear the breathing of his wife. From another room one of his daughters coughed. . . .

In the Frank coal mine, the night shift was getting ready to lay off. The nineteen men were tired, dirty . . . ready to quit. They plodded toward the mine entrance. One of the men noticed that the mine horses were acting very nervous. He was too tired to care. . . .

In the Leitch household the baby was crying. . . .

At ten minutes past four hell broke loose in Frank. The whole top and north side of Turtle Mountain slid, with a terrifying roar, directly down into the Crow's Nest.

The freight had just passed the Mountain when the avalanche struck. The startled crew, looking back as the train bumped to a halt, heard a sound louder than the loudest thunder, and saw what they thought was a heavy gas, or fog rising from mountain and town. To their surprised eyes the town of Frank had apparently disappeared. The crew gathered at the rear of the train; huddled together, silent, awed by the sudden tragedy.

It was Sid Choquette, the brakeman, who first remembered the "Spokane Flyer". The express was shortly due to speed through the Pass, on its way to the coast. Looking the men could guess that the C. P. R. tracks lay

covered by stone many feet deep.

There was only one thing to do and Sid did that thing. He started back toward Frank, over the slide, with pieces of rock still hurtling down the Mountain. The dust was so thick he couldn't see what lay ahead. Some of the stones were as large as boxcars; but Sid went right ahead. He arrived in time to flag the "Flyer".

Sam Ennes, who couldn't sleep, suddenly found himself pinned under the jagged timbers of his home. Desperately Sam pushed at the weight that held him down. After a terrible struggle, he got himself free. His legs were torn by the nails in the boards. His face was bleeding from many cuts.

Somewhere he could hear his children crying. He began to frantically search in the ruins. He found the three girls first, then his wife. They had miraculously escaped serious injury.

Suddenly Mrs. Ennes began to shriek that the baby, Gladys, was missing. They searched in the dust-filled darkness and then Mrs. Ennes found the baby buried in slime and mud. Believing that the child was dead, Mrs. Ennes stumbled toward the faint light in the Maclean house, beyond the stricken area.

When she arrived she discovered that the baby was alive and not even scratched. Mrs. Ennes herself had a broken collar bone.

In the mine the workmen reached the entrance. They found it blocked up tight. Believing that it was just a small cave-in, the men turned and went west to another smaller exit. The horses remained in the mine.

When the miners got outside, many of them knew they would never see their homes and families again. A number of the houses were buried over one hundred feet deep.

In the Leitch house, three children escaped while three others and the parents were killed. One of the children, a baby, was entirely uninjured. It was found on a huge rock that had been pushed quite a distance along by the slide.

What caused the slide? The unharmed people of Frank wondered that morning. Some said it was a volcano; others that it was an earthquake. Many thought it was a mine explosion, or a great quantity of gas suddenly released.

That the side of Turtle Mountain, which seemed so friendly and protective, had simply slid down on the little town crouching under its shoulder, did not occur to many those first few hours. Tales of a visitation for sin were heard; to the drunk leaving the barroom, this seemed likely. He

started to run -- no one knew where.

Help was rushed to Frank -- not that there was much anybody could do. The dead were already buried. The living were in mortal terror that the rest of the mountain would come smashing down.

Many of the passengers on the westbound train held up by the slide, tried to walk across to the trains waiting on the other side. They found their shoes cut to pieces, their clothing ruined by the lime stone dust. A Calgary Herald reporter on the scene wired his paper: "To traverse two miles of boulders, some bigger than a railway coach, tossed into piles and ravines, is a task that tries a strong man, well shod. For people with thin shoes, and unaccustomed to mountains, the trip is almost suicide. I had a suit of clothes ruined by the white lime, my boots were cut to pieces, and my physical system is a wreck that calls for at least a weeks recuperation."

The slide had occurred on Wednesday morning. On Saturday, Frank was a deserted village. A committee, including the mine inspector, crawled up the side of Turtle and reported that they had seen large cracks, newly formed, which led them to believe that the slide would reoccur. This report, backed up by the statements of Engineer McHenry of the C. P. R. that he had kept a careful watch on Turtle Mountain for most of a day, and had seen the

mountain creeping , convinced the remaining citizens of Frank that they should vacate. Most of them went to Blairmore.

For nine days a careful watch was kept. At the end of nine days, when no farther general slide had occurred, Premier Hultain decided that the citizens of Frank could return if they wished. M any did return, to live most of the summer in terror. Finally there was a smaller slide in September. This slide, according to the Calgary Herald, was never really reported. The Frank citizens feared the report would "damage the town commercially".

One of the touching incidents connected with the story concerns the horses imprisoned in the mine. The men escaped fairly easily, but were unable to take the horses with them.

When the rescue party managed to clear the main slope, some 29 days later, they encountered a depressing sight. All but one of the horses had died of starvation and thirst. The animals had gnawed the mine props and the wood on the cars in search of food.

The remaining horse was fastened between a car and the side of the entrance. He was very weak -- almost gone. The horse was given a few drops of water and brandy. He

lifted his head. The party left in search of blankets to keep the horse warm, since they could not move him. As they went they heard the horse neigh faintly several times. When they returned ten minutes later, the horse was dead.

Old timers say the horse died of a broken heart. He thought he was being left alone in the mine.

The greatest slide in the Rocky Mountains was the result of probably not a single cause, but a combination of causes. There was a mild earthquake in the region in 1901 which may have been a factor. The fact that larger chambers had been opened up in the mine, may also provide a reason.

Turtle Mountain, however, is peculiar. It is a great block of limestone, overthrust upon shale, sandstone and coal beds. The whole thing is an unusually weak mass of rock. There is some reason for believing that the "slide" can happen again. Frank folk, apparently, are not worrying.

Passengers on the C. P. R. through the Pass, are amazed at the desolation still to be seen. The railroad now runs right on top of the slide. It took 4,000 men a month, working twenty-four hours a day, to do the job.

When they were clearing away the debris for the railroad,

the blasting caused snow to fall in the middle of May! Newly born calves on ranches in the Frank area smothered and died as a result of the snow.

For weeks the Frank school was used as a morgue. Parts of a human body would be found, and a jury to try to make identification. This was not often possible.

While rebuilding the railroad three skeletons were found They were buried and on the graves is the inscription:

"Here be the Remains of Some of
The Victims of the Frank Slide.
April 29, 1903

About 80 persons in all were killed that day. The slide has now become legend.